

THE CRITIC.

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"Agamus igitur pingui Minervâ."

CIC. DE AMIC.

MY readers doubtless remember (a phrase used by all well-bred authors, when they wish to notice any thing which they are sure their readers do *not* remember;) my readers then *doubtless remember*, that in my treaty of Amity and Limits, was contained an article, by which I bound myself to produce a laudatory review of "The Backwoodsman, (a Poem)," within five weeks from the date of that treaty. It is my design to proceed to the redemption of this promise.

I scarcely know whether it would not be proper to make some apology for introducing a *critique* upon a work of this kind, at the distance of almost two years from its publication. Formerly, indeed, the duration of an author's fame for a century, was fixed upon as a genuine test of his excellence; but when

the number of bards increased, this rule was found to be productive of great and manifest injustice, in many instances. The period of an hundred days has therefore been substituted as a proper term of probation for works of fiction; and a modern poet, whose volume is read at the expiration of three months, one week and one day, from the hour of its issuing from the press, is now reputed a man of genius, entitled to the decorations of calf-gilt, as well as the honour of an undisturbed repose upon an upper shelf, safe from the unclean hands of the grocer, and the profane contact of the vender of confectionaries. This rule being established, it of course was settled as a principle, that all reviews of such works should be published before the time at which the productions themselves would cease to be read, or, in other words, would become immortal. For the poetical immortality has, of late years, become very similar in its phenomena to that of "the faithful departed;" and is supposed to take place, when the objects to which it is accorded, are no longer "seen of men." From the customs just mentioned, arose all my difficulties on the present occasion. After profound meditation, however, it appeared to me, that in an affair of this kind, the great excellence of the subject to be commented on, would justify a deviation from the general rule; and since it must be notorious, that "The Backwoodsman, (a Poem)," is at this

moment, as much read as it ever was, I shall prosecute my design, without further scruple.

Mr. J. K. Paulding's prefatory advertisement deserves to be noticed in the most favourable terms, as well for its striking originality, as on account of the goodness of heart which it displays. Other poets have professed various motives for the publication of their works, such as the entreaties of friends, the commands of a patron, nay, some of them have scarcely endeavoured to conceal that the true source of their inspiration was to be found in the purse of their bookseller. Our author, however, nobly disdains to be moved by such petty springs of action. He writes neither for the favour of a patron, nor for the amusement of his friends, nor yet for the replenishment of his purse; but simply with the meritorious design of "indicating to the youthful writers of his native country, the rich poetic resources with which it abounds," and making his work a sort of text book, for the study and admiration of all future rhymesters; thereby creating as it were a new order of the Didactic, which professes to teach, not by precept, but example.

Having set out with so novel an idea, it was not to be expected that Mr. J. K. Paulding would condescend to borrow from any other writer, in the structure of his poem. In former days the fable was considered one of the essentials in a production of this nature,

and the bards of those times supposed the descriptions, &c. to be merely adventitious ornaments. But Mr. J. K. Paulding has reversed the matter, for his story was merely "assumed as affording an easy and natural way of introducing a greater variety of scenery." Now, it cannot, to be sure, be denied, that when a man sits down to write a *narrative* poem, like this, it is the most "natural" thing in the world, that he should have a *story*. But I never before knew that telling a story was either an easy or a natural way of beginning the description of a mountain or a river. Mr. J. K. Paulding, however, has asserted that it is, and I feel no disposition to controvert his authority; so that we may look to have all our systems of geography in the form of Romances, and the reports of our topographical engineers, disguised as memoirs of Women of Quality. And, as the story was admitted solely for the sake "of introducing a greater variety of scenery," so I am led to believe, from divers appearances throughout the book, that the rhymes were merely "assumed as an easy and natural way" of making it a poem.

It is not however to be supposed, that our author has carried this spirit of originality into all the minutiae of his poem. Satisfied with exhibiting his creative faculty in the novelty of the general structure, he has humbled himself so far as to borrow many of his most strik-

ing images, and even modes of expression, from the celebrated writers of other times; and I should particularly notice, that he seems to have studied, with singular assiduity and success, the pages of that Aristotle of modern poets, the author of the learned treatise ΠΕΡΙ ΒΑΘΟΥΣ.*

The Backwoodsman opens with a passage containing four lines, which state what the Poet *does* write about, to which, from the laudable desire of preventing misapprehension, he has appended ten more, explaining what it is that he *does not* write about. This eagerness to make himself intelligible to the meanest capacity, in a work designed for the instruction of youth, merits the highest encomiums;—more especially as it is a point in which former bards have seldom taken much pains to excel. It will be sufficient for our purpose to mention what *is* his subject.

“ My *humble* theme is of a *hardy* swain,
 “ The *lowliest* of the *lowly* rural train,
 “ Who left his *native* fields afar to roam
 “ In *Western* wilds, in search of *happier* home.”

Then comes an invocation interrogatory to the muse, in the course of which the Bard puts many puzzling questions to her; but, finding that he is not likely to get an answer, he goes on to lay down the extraordinary

* Martinus Scriblerus, of the art of sinking in Poetry.

advantages which will arise from the possession of a native poetical reputation.

"Thrice happy he who first shall strike the lyre
"With homebred feeling, and with *homebred fire*—"

Our author does not tell us which of our indigenous animals it is that breeds this devouring element, nor what would be the proper course of its domestic education; and indeed we can hardly blame him for concealing secrets of such singular value to their possessor. Whoso can obtain this "*homebred fire*," may well despise the philosopher's stone. For, besides being placed at the head of all Bards, he is to enjoy an entire personal and poetical security, whether this mighty empire shall continue to roll, like the rest of the world, from west to east,—or shall change its course, like an apple on a string, and revolve from east to west—or shall finally, in the perverseness of an independent spirit, perturb the whole frame of nature by turning head over heels towards the north or south pole.

"Secure, that wheresoe'er this empire rolls,
"Or east, or west, or tow'rd the firm fix'd poles,
"While," &c.—

The Hero of the Poem came from the village of Hudson, where he was born, and where, it is stated as highly probable, he might have died, if he had not moved away;

"Here was he born,—and here *perchance* had died,
"But fate ordain'd he other scenes should bide;—"

The gentle simplicity of this couplet, was doubtless borrowed from that venerable relic of poesy, which is still repeated in some of (what Mr. Paulding denominates) our "nursery-keeps,"—

"There was an old woman lived under the hill,
"And, *if she's not gone*, she lives there still."

Basil (for that is the name of the hero) takes a wife to his bosom; and, being shortly afterwards sorely vexed in spirit by a neighbouring *scarecrow*, the first adventure which is recorded after his entrance into the matrimonial connection, is nothing less than an attempt to *chase away* this disturber of his domestic peace;

"Each morn we saw him, ere the rising sun,
"And saw him, when his golden course was run,
"Toiling, through all the livelong tedious day,"
"To *chase the scarecrow Poverty* away."—

This Quixotic undertaking seems to have proved rather difficult in the execution; and, indeed, Basil might have expected as much; for *scarecrows* are not usually supposed to possess any large portion of the *locomotive* faculty, and a man of reflection would have foreseen at once the probable result of such an expedition. Having entered upon the bu-

* That is, being rendered into prose, "we saw him
"every *morning*, before sun-rise, and *after sun-set*, toil-
"ing at *mid-day*."

siness however, we shall not be surprised to learn that it occupied his whole time and attention; insomuch that he never discovered the village church, nor even knew when it was Sunday;

"And when the sacred day of rest came round,
"Nor rest, nor village church by him was found."

Our hero being thus furnished with employment, the poet leaves him up to his ears in business, and turns short round, to say a few words, in the way of invocation, to *Independence*. It seems that he forgot this, his tutelary genius, in the opening of the Poem, but he compensates very amply for the neglect, by the brilliant manner in which he now accosts this tenth muse. I deem it the safer mode to analyse the passage in the first place; and, after explaining it in that way, I shall venture to present it to my readers, in the *concrete*, not without some apprehensions that it may, even then, quite overwhelm them.

Independence, then, according to the Poet, is,

1. "*Man's bright mental sun,*" which *sun* has been "*won* by our brave country, with "*blood and tears.*" It seems probable that the word *won* is here intended to have the force of *extinguished*.

2. It is "*Parent of all.*"

3. It "*high-mettled man adorns.*"

4. It is "*The nerve of steel;*" this must mean a *Watchspring*. Perhaps the Poet has been

cheated into the purchase of so *independent* a chronometer, that he can never tell what's o'clock; and takes this opportunity of being smart at the expense of the swindling watch-maker.

5. It is "*the soul that meanness scorns*;" I am positive he would say "the soul that scorns meanness."

6. It is "The mounting wind, that spurns the tyrant's sway." *Wind* should be changed into *wave*; when the passage would stand, as a very classical allusion to the attempt which Xerxes made at enchaining the sea. No one that I know of, ever attempted to subject the *winds*, except Eolus, their lawful sovereign; and so far were they from *spurning* his authority, that they obeyed him with singular meekness.

7. It is

"The eagle eye, that mocks the GOD OF DAY,

"Turns on the LORDLY UPSTART scorn for scorn,

"And drops its lid to none of WOMAN BORN—"

Mr. Paulding must have some pique against the God of Day, or he could never have so far forgotten himself, as to make this violent personal attack upon him. He first *mocks* him, then calls him a *lordly upstart*, and finally twits him with having been *born of a woman*; an accusation very derogatory from his god-head. If the fact be as Mr. Paulding asserts it, it is certainly the most fiery birth upon record. The mother of Paris *dreamed* that she

was delivered of a fire-brand; but, even if the occurrence had actually taken place, it would by no means have been comparable to the present phenomenon. Leaving Mr. Paulding, however, to make his peace with Apollo, (against whom, indeed, he evinces throughout a very determined spirit of hostility) I proceed to insert the whole passage; which in the text, runs as follows:

" O! Independence! man's bright mental sun,
" With blood and tears by our brave country won,
" Parent of all, high-mettled man adorns,
" The nerve of steel, the soul that meanness scorns,
" The mounting wind, that spurns the tyrant's sway,
" The eagle eye, that mocks the God of Day,
" Turns on the lordly upstart scorn for scorn,
" And drops its lid to none of woman born."

The volcanic eruption of his brain being thus over, our bard finds himself sufficiently cool to attempt a series of scientific deductions, and the next twenty lines unquestionably form the most extraordinary specimen of poetical ratiocination, that was ever exhibited to the world. Unluckily I have neither time nor room to comment on, or even insert them; and shall therefore return forthwith to Basil, whom we left deep in that unprofitable undertaking of *chasing a scarecrow*.

Misfortunes now came very thick upon him; for we are informed that,

" Years *passed* away, and every year that *past*
" Brought cares and toils still heavier than the last,
" For still, each *passing* year, his fruitful wife
" Brought a new burthen struggling into life."

But this was by no means the worst of his evils. The time had arrived when our Hero was to be severely visited for his neglect of "the village church." The piety of Baucis and Philemon was formerly rewarded by the miraculous enlargement of their cottage; and poor Basil, by an opposite dispensation (probably induced by his going a fishing every Sunday) was condemned to see his log hut gradually decreasing in size, and his little children, one by one, squeezed out of their habitation, like eels that are flayed alive by a mischievous school boy;

— "Sooth to say, his house *became too small*,
"Within its narrow walls to hold them all—"

To add to all his other distresses, we are told that "*At last* one winter came," which is afterwards called "*an endless winter*"—and, as Basil had probably exposed himself a good deal to the night air in his vain pursuit of the scarecrow, it was not extraordinary that he should be afflicted with the rheumatism to a very alarming degree; and accordingly, we find it so; for,

— "sad to tell
"Rheumatic agonies on Basil fell,"

which fairly laid him up. And now the Poet digresses once more, in order to pronounce his opinions on the subject of sickness. We are given to understand, with an air of profound gravity, that when a poor man gets sick,

he loses his health, and his appetite, and *all* his comforts—*every one*, as the Poet adds, in order to impress the truth of his assertion more forcibly upon our minds.

— “When the poor man *sickens*, all is gone,
“*Health, food, and all his comforts—every one.*”

It grieves me that I cannot allow to Mr. Paulding the merit of originality in this couplet; for he evidently took the hint of it, from a passage in an old poet named Shakspeare; who has laid it down expressly, “that, the “more one sickens, the less at ease he is.”— (As You Like it, Act 3, scene 2.) The correctness of the doctrine itself, however, cannot be questioned; and it is strikingly exemplified in the case of Basil, who remains in a very desolate situation, constantly disturbed by the vicinity of the scarecrow, and so ill, that Mr. Paulding thinks he may leave him, without fear of an escape; and take a few moments for the discussion of the ancient proverb—

“What can’t be cured
“Must be endured;”—

which he manages with great skill. At last, the “endless” winter came to a conclusion, and Basil began to hope for the liberation of his rheumatic members. But, alas! he was destined to be persecuted by prodigies. The spring approached indeed, but it approached with the phenomena that usually attend the

dreary months of autumn; and the leaves withered and fell, instead of growing—

“Now laughing spring came on ———
 “* * * * *

“And push’d away the wither’d leaves that hung
 “Whispering through many a shivering wint’ry blast,
 “To fall in the first breath of spring at last.”—

These dead leaves give rise to a very appropriate sentiment; for, says the poet, they fall to the ground, where

“————— they lie
 “Unmark’d by all, save some lone musing eye
 “That marvels much, and idly, on its way,
 “Men, with *such* cause to weep, should be so gay!”—

And now comes a long dissertation upon the advantages of spring, which the bard declares to be the season of true happiness; and the treatise concludes with the following *tirade* against whomsoever may be of a different opinion;

“————— those who know
 “A surer path to peace on earth below,
 “May—*keep it to themselves*—I lack it not,
 “Content—*with what I am*, and—*with my lot*!”

Basil at length begins to recover; and the sun’s beams set one of his “rigid members” after another—a twitching, like those of a frog under the effects of galvanism;

“The sun’s warm beams like oil of gladness came,
 “And pour’d fresh vigour through his wasted frame;
 “Releas’d his rigid members like a charm,
 “And—now—a leg, and—now—a helpless arm,
 “Reviv’d to motion, life, and liberty,
 “Till, in good time, his wasted frame was free.”

Basil was yet a little uneasy, for he considered the possibility of the return of winter, and in the meanwhile, the *scarecrow* retained its former position, in spite of all his efforts, and his cottage still persisted in its propensity to grow downwards. Under such circumstances he must have been very glad to hear of a western country, in which there were no scarecrows, and where such portents of direful import as those which worried him, had never been known. Thither therefore he determined to remove; his "trembling wife"—

"Consented *gayly*—with a *tearful* smile."

So, in "a *little* time," they packed up their "*little* store of goods," in a "*little* cover'd cart"—and prepared every thing for their journey. Before setting out, however, Basil wisely resolved to make some amends for that neglect of the "village church," which had brought so many misfortunes upon his head. He accordingly attended it, and offered his prayers to Him,

"Whose *help* is always ready for the man

"That *helps himself*, when *help himself* he can."

After service, Basil bade farewell to his neighbours; who endeavoured to deter him from his purpose, by telling many queer stories, (at which

"—*stiff on end*, the urchins' light hair stood—,")
of Indians, and prowling wolves, and of

"—*shaggy bears*, that *every where* abound."

By the by, this ubiquity of "shaggy bears" must be a discovery of Mr. J. K. Paulding's; at least, I have not been able to find any mention of it, in the systems of Zoology that have come in my way. Basil, however, was not to be frightened, and the first book ends with his most heroical departure on the pilgrimage of discovery.

I have thus endeavoured to point out the most prominent beauties of a small portion of "The Backwoodsman (a Poem,)" and here I shall, for the present, let the matter rest,—hoping to introduce some remarks occasionally on the remaining parts of the work. The other four books are equal in merit to the first, and I have no hesitation in saying, that this expedition of Mr. Paulding's muse is the very "brave decisive flight" which he somewhere speaks of, as portending such signal benefits to the world. The publication of the *Backwoodsman* is an æra in the history of our country; and, as the Mussulmans date the years of their glory from the flight of Mahomet, so it cannot be questioned that this flight of J. K. Paulding, will for ever be accounted the poetical Hegira of America.

I have received La Bruyere's communication; which is so admirably written, that I should be glad to enrich the pages of the Critic with it; were it not that I had previously made up my mind on no account whatever

to revive the subject of which "La Bruyere" treats. I trust, however, that this will not deter this gentleman (who seems to be a genuine man of wit) from honouring me with his correspondence in future.

R.